

## AMRITA PRITAM: VOICE OF DEFIANCE

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### ABSTRACT

*Traditionally and historically speaking, Indian women were always been told a code of conduct, as far as their expression of love is concerned. Men were supposed to take initiative and express love. Amrita Pritam was the first woman writer in Punjabi literature, which broke the existing norms of social construct. She was born in 1919, and started writing, at the early age of sixteen. Her narratives were developed, as an alternative voice and brought in a change of thought. Her two novels The Skeleton (Pinjar) and Village no 36 (Chuk no 36), will provide the background reference point to show the shift of approach. The stories unfold the patterns of society, when women and their identity in the framework of social norms was concerned, and how they were not allowed to express their feelings. Village no 36 is a bold narrative, Amrita Pritam went against the tide to register her voice, against a taboo that women cannot express love.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Voices of Resistance, Love, Emotion & Women Characters*

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### INTRODUCTION

Time and again, History has witnessed forces which try to put human beings, under worse conditions and attack their freedom to exist. Environment of annihilation is created to curb the flow of natural progression of human emotions. When, social construct undergoes an un-proportional distribution of not only wealth, but also of ideas, ideology and point of views and, as a result one community or one gender is preferred over the other, a wave of unrest begins. Narratives emerge that try to resist the oppression of any kind; a margin of society has enough space and scope to be able to redefine structures and ideas. Concepts that do not find a place in the mainstream text of society create voices of resistance. Pre-occupation with mundane life is a great hindrance when we are unable to hear these voices of resistance - actual meaning of life lies in the way people feel freedom and justice in day to day life. When phenomena are only terms, there may arise situations when we wish to live these terms in real sense of the word. Quest for rational understanding of differences which marginalize people compel us to dwell deep and know the truth.

Authority of one encroaches another's freedom in some right; structures and systems are so formed that relationship with the culture find altogether different interpretations which block the way to truth. When active and changing face of structures becomes stagnant, voices of resistance are heard, meanings of symbols and emotions are redefined. New narratives come into existence, old narratives don't become redundant rather are read with a changed context.

Amrita Pritam is one such voice, who created narratives to negate the existing method of dialectic of emotions. She is majorly known for her poetry, but her work of fiction has also registered its presence, immediately after partition in 1947. Of all her novels, Pinjar (The Skeleton), published first time in 1950, is her most famous and talked about novel. It is a multi-layered text, which touches more than one theme, the novel

represents a situation, when identity of one section of the society is curbed, and their emotional expression is controlled, in the form of contradiction, amongst Hindu Muslim ideologies. Depth of the novel lies in establishing the fact that, real tragedy occurs when people are rejected emotionally. It was a period, when not only pieces of land, but women were also things to be colonized. The novel is a narrative of unheard emotional story of women like Puro. Amrita Pritam documented the pain, which is deep rooted in the framework of social structure, Puro's abduction and her rape evoke immense pain in the mind of the readers, but the author attempts to foreground the pangs of rejection and most, importantly absence of love from her life. The novel is set against the backdrop of partition and emotional pain of a girl, who has been isolated and not even accepted, into her own family after she has been raped. Denial of love and affection was the central reason for the tragic life of Puro; the entire narrative is built around this search for harmony and equilibrium.

Intrinsic suffocation raises voices against the prevalent system of oppression; Amrita Pritam's narratives raise voice, against the non-allowance of freedom of expression of love, by women. There were times that, women were put to shame, if ever they gave expression to their feelings of love. Amrita Pritam herself faced such situation in her life, she was scolded, when she wrote a love poem and was forced to write religious poetry, but with her strength within she raised voice against this attitude of society and wrote, literature in which she portrayed women, who not only felt love but expressed that boldly. Women were not in minority, but they were marginalized physically and psychologically, Puro's pain when she was denied entry, into her own house is heart rendering. Her mother said, "Daughter, it would have been better if you had died at birth! If the shaikhs find you were here, they will kill your father and your brothers. They will kill all of us." (Pritam 7)

Amrita Pritam didn't forget the strength of love, even in the narratives which are based on themes like partition. She showed that, cultures and traditions which have unequal distribution of rights of expression of love suffer damage; Puro had to marry her rapist Rashida. There is a sea change in Rashida's character between, when the narrative unfolds and as the novel progresses; his repentance and sense of guilt made him a much better human being. His transformation lies in the power of love, he loved Puro and later in the novel we see him saving the lives of other girls – he helped Puro and saved her brother's wife suffering the same plight, as Puro. Consciously or un-consciously, every human being is in search of harmony, nothing but love can bring equilibrium in the lives of people.

Voices of resistance are voices against the concept of 'other', Amrita Pritam's narratives represent that, only alternative to the feeling of 'other' is concern and love. If, we are moving from primitive to modern era of civilization and equal opportunity is not given, in the realization of sentiments and its expression, the movement would be an illusion. If racial discriminations are bad, if caste superiority is damaging, so is the practice of treating people differently on the grounds of expressions of sentiments. A drastic shift is seen in the way sentiment of love is seen by women, with the onset of narratives by Amrita Pritam. Discourse, on love owe much to Amrita Pritam's writings in 20<sup>th</sup> century India and Punjabi literary tradition, never imagined such utterances of right to express love by women. Although, she acclaimed much fame in her lifetime but she also faced criticism, Village No. 36 (Chuk No. 36), was such a bold narrative that it was many years before it was accepted. It is a story of a woman, Alka, who is learning the art of painting from Kumar; Kumar's character is portrayed, as a famous painter in the novel. When, she expresses her love for Kumar and was ready to submit her body for 20 rupees, it was a shock to Kumar. Kumar would visit different women to satisfy his physical urge; Alka said that, she was ready to be that unknown woman. "If you have any physical desire, you wish to go to a woman, who doesn't have any identity, identity can create relationships and you don't want that." (Pritam 44)

Treatment of sexuality was never so boldly expressed by an Indian woman writer, in Punjabi literature. The narrative is an expression of revolt, against the age-old idea of women's non-expression of love, they were taught to remain mum and wait for the male partner, to express love. This idea of passive nature was not acceptable to Amrita Pritam. Almost, all her novels have woman characters, which not only can feel love but express it as well.

Her voice against the brutality done to women, during the partition of the country was addressed to Waris Shah, a well-known Sufi poet born in 1722, who narrated the story of Heer-Ranjha and stressed upon the pangs of separation, as felt by Heer. Amrita Pritam in this classic poem of hers asked Waris Shah, to unfold another chapter of love to know the feelings of lakhs of girls; if he would feel the pain of one girl, now there are hundreds of thousands, who are hapless to find love and affection.

Voices of love appear in the form of voices of resistance. Amrita Pritam's narratives are a reflection of her strong desire, to live life as she herself wanted to live and she succeeded in that regard. "From the time of Heer, from the time of Vedas and Upanishads, from the time of Gargi to today, many women have desired to live their lives on their own terms and those who dared were either defeated or perished." (Trilok 3) Amrita Pritam's desire to live life, according to her own terms, and to write literature without being hindered by the people, who belong to patriarchal school of thought.

In one of her poems she says, "History came to my kitchen and went away hungry." (Trilok2)

She felt a kind of suffocation on the plight of women, who were pushed to the margins and were not allowed to register their names in history, so much so, that they were not allowed to feel and express. She broke the norm and started writing literature, to pave way to accepting a new position of women, who could experience and express love. Amrita Pritam had felt the wounds of women, which they bore on their souls, her writings are reminiscences of pains she felt all through her life – pain of not writing whatever she wanted to, pain of partition and exploitation of women, pain of separation from a person whom she had loved the most.

The behavioral patterns are decided by powerful and powerless, are there to obey. Classification of society into gender consciousness is developed to control psychological framework of the powerless. The gap between powerful and powerless is a stretchable space, which can be filled with voices of resistance. When a work is created to shift the position of existing norms, a clash between powerful and the powerless arises.

Resonance of new space is heard in the narratives of Amrita Pritam, like Village No. 36, which is a strong response to the fixed notions of love and sexuality of women. When women express love, live life on their own terms, it is considered obscenity; this very notion is broken out in the works of Amrita Pritam. She ignored the criticism; labels attached to her name and kept creating the sounds of rebel. The gap between signifier and signified causes lots of disturbance, when an effort to create a balance is initiated, quite a resistance is produced. When freedom of expression of emotions is encroached, conflicts are created and identities are questioned.

The climax of *The Skeleton* lies in Puro's strength, when she denies her going back to her parents and her brother; she justified her existence with concern for other women, who were facing the same plight as hers. The novel shows that, answer to violence of any kind be it physical or psychological, lies in concern towards humanity. "Amrita Pritam perceives that, love is the greatest thing in the world. It can overcome vices and can inculcate a sense of acceptance in life." (Varma 25)

Voices of resistance are powerful, only when they are not colored with revenge, concern can be the only answer to any kind of oppression. The two novels are poles apart in their approach, but they both are created out of an urge to register a voice against persisting norms of oppression, be it through partition of the country that, women were caged and not allowed to give vent to their emotions, even their near ones denied their existence or psychological oppression, when love of a woman is considered a threat to the identity of man. Kumar felt that, he couldn't love Alka because, love would shadow his identity.

## CONCLUSIONS

Amrita Pritam's narratives are answers to complex nature of social constraints, but emotions do not find any obstacle, which cannot be crossed, sentiments are not slave to any outside agencies.

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